{See Note at end.}

UNITY

CHURCH-DOOR PULPIT,

FOR

FREEDOM, FELLOWSHIP AND CHARACTER IN RELIGION.

Series II. Chicago, September 18, 1885. No. 8.

# THE BIBLE REGAINED.

By JOHN C. LEARNED.

"The Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books."—*Channing*, 1819.

"The Bible is going to be more to liberals at the end of the 19th century than it has been at any time since the beginning. It grew so shallow as the book of God! But it has grown so deep as the book of Man!"—*W. C. Gannett.*

"'*What does it prove?*' said the senior wrangler of an English University, when asked to read Milton's 'Paradise Lost.' It is not a demonstration, but an education."—*Leslie Stephen.* So of the Bible.

Do we realize that the Bible was lost for a thousand years? It passed under the cloud of supernaturalism and superstition. It disappeared from all rational use in the gloom of the dark ages. "Discussion died out as mediæval darkness deepened."

From the beginning of the 5th century, when the canon was fixed by the papal decree of Innocent I., until the 15th century, when Jewish exegesis and classical learning revived a long slumbering interest, the bible had no existence for the people. It was virtually banished from the world. It was locked up with monks or buried in the crypts of the church.

If parts of it were doled out here and there by the priests, it was done to advance ecclesiastical designs, to fortify their own authority, to increase the church's wealth, to belittle and crush out all powers not in their own control. Its origin was forgotten. Its phrases were filled and fixed with dogmatic meanings lasting until now. Though manifold nations speaking as many living tongues came into the empire of the Christian faith, the "book of God" lay sealed in dead languages, as though he were now dumb or disdained to utter the eternal truth to his children in plain words, or through any medium but the priest. Thus the common people were debarred from all knowledge of the Bible: to read it, for one not authorized, became a deadly sin, and so religion was shrouded with oracular mystery.

For a thousand years the bible was lost to man. His own best book was taken from him on the plea of its being unsafe for him, or too good for him. That very volume which was the product of his deepest spiritual life and convictions; those writings which recorded his struggles with temptation, his strivings after God and truth, his fears and longings through long ages of costly experience—all were swept out of his reach; and he

was threatened with penalties here and hereafter, if he sought to regain them or look into them for himself.

And in that thousand years of its concealment there grew up the doctrine, so impossible in the beginning, that this was not man's book at all; it was God's book. Old Testament or New Testament, it was different from all other writings, and nobody had a right to teach or read it; indeed, nobody could understand it who was not ordained of God. In time men wholly forgot how these records came into existence; how these collections were made. The priests of the Latin church could split hairs, but had little learning. Of the Greek and Hebrew language they knew almost nothing. They supplemented their scanty knowledge with abundant surmise and tradition. So that it became second nature for them at length (as Theodore Parker says) to take "authority for truth, not truth for authority."

There came a time, however, when this broke down. Men grew tired of much that the Romish church did and taught. It was somehow discovered that the ancient Greeks and Latins had rich stores of thought, and that not nearly all the wisdom of the world was in the hands or heads of the hierarchy of Christendom. There was a revival of learning. It spread beyond the circle of the priesthood, and transformed priests into doubters and inquirers. Even the common people felt the impulse and began to thirst for knowledge. The universities teemed with students and a new life. Among other classics like Cicero and Plato, they reached out to the revisions and manuscripts of the scriptures. At first with awe and fear and trembling. Then they were seized with amazement and delight at what they found. Luther had no idea that the Latin Bible which he came across in the library of the university at Erfurt was so large a book. He had never seen one before. It raised a multitude of questions which he could not smother. And we know how in his times honest men became bold enough to speak out; while the printing press stood ready to sow broadcast its revolutionizing products. The great discovery, however, made at this period was that the bible contained plenty of weapons with which to fight the papacy. It was studied with this object in view, and its texts were turned against Rome as weapons from an arsenal in the hands of the enemy.

The bible was at length found, and protestantism was born. But it was found with the label on it which the church had put there. It was "the word of God." No matter whether this title came by accident, or ignorance, or design, the men of the Reformation rejoiced in the appellation. It fell in with their needs, and they took the collection under this superscription at its full value. The ark of the covenant was now in their own hands. They felt that they had wrested this great prize from the corrupt hierarchy of Rome. With the open bible they might defy the pope and conquer the world. They would use it themselves, and give it to the people. They would translate it into every tongue and send it to every nation, not yet as the book of man, but as the book of God.

This was a great step. Trouble enough did it make for the great ecclesiastical empire. It divided Christendom. Indeed, it seemed as though another box of Pandora had been opened on the earth. Innumerable sects sprang up everywhere, warring with each other, and ceaselessly disputing over the meaning of the sacred text. But the great hierarchy was hopelessly broken. In vain has it tried since then to gain its lost ascendency. Bibles were in time scattered over all lands. Everybody might have the holy oracles, and henceforth the high and exclusive function of church and priest was permanently impaired.

But coming to the people as the "book of God," as the infallible word, as the only guide to salvation, with large measure of the old ecclesiastical interpretations inherited with the language, there was ample field for the display of superstition and for the growth of error and extravagance. The whole volume seemed to be full of dogmatic meanings. And so long as its composite and human quality could be ignored, there was no theory so absurd that it might not be quoted in its support. So the turn given to a single word might carry with it the fate—the

eternal fate—of unnumbered souls. Every particle was scrutinized with studious care. Every phrase was significant, and might be freighted with awful import. If the ritual declined in importance, "the word" rose correspondingly. "Men may be saved without a sacrament, but not without a testament," said Luther, in direct opposition to the decrees of Rome. Everywhere the expounder of "the word" was sought for his instruction. Some went so far as to declare that the scriptures foretold everything that came to pass, meant all they could be made to mean; and they expanded the language into numerous senses, often grotesque, irrational and contradictory.

So the bible was not yet discovered as the *book of man*, as the natural history and rational product of the human soul. It was not yet seen as the translation of the religious consciousness into literature—a phenomenon which always attends the great epochs of man's religious experience. Just as the race can give no account of its infancy, but supposes God moulded and made man with hands out of the clay of Eden, so the race forgets how its bibles were written as the epoch passes by, and in an aftertime beholds them as miraculous—does not see that they are its own child and creation.

The bible, even if discovered and taken out of the clutches of the Catholic Church, was not yet an object upon which the reason was free to act. Men were restrained by the thought that this was unlike all other books. It was infallibly inspired; it was as if let down out of heaven—did not grow leaf by leaf as other volumes do. It had had a kind of divine superintendence such as no other book ever had, and hence was to be read and interpreted by rules peculiar to itself. This was the theory. So it was bound—as really as those first copies printed to meet the cravings of the first Protestants, which were held by a chain to the pulpit or sacrificial altar of the churches. Men still read the bible bound by the chain of that doctrine which only offered it as the book of God, and the readers were bound in their minds as they gazed upon the page. The veil of superstition was upon their hearts.

Yet the way had been prepared and the time was coming when men would break away from these old traditions. Very strongly for two hundred years more (1550–1750) did dogmatic protestantism carry the day; feebly was any other voice heard. But scholarship was patiently pressing on. All the ancient authorities were undergoing investigation. Flaws in logic and gaps in testimony were discovered, and there was again the courage to speak out. The scholastics, in their day, had used scripture texts to garnish their "dead and empty categories," and sought to reconcile Moses and Christ to Aristotle. Nicolas of Lyra, in the 14th century, influenced, perhaps, by Aben Ezra and other Jewish commentators, had announced more free and rational views of the bible. Afterward came Richard Simon and Benedict Spinoza; Milton, Locke and Newton in England; the Arminians of Holland; Semler, Ernesti and Lessing; still later, Eichhorn, Vatke and Ewald; Paulus, Bruno Bauer, Strauss, Ferdinand Baur and Renan; Reuss, Bunsen, Davidson, Colenso and Kuenen. These are some of the great names in biblical history and criticism. These scholars have made it possible to read the Bible rationally, and led to the reconstruction of all our theologies. Never can thoughtful men, certainly not those who have followed the footsteps of these inquirers, go back to the beliefs prevailing before and at the time of the Reformation.

Following out the method and suggestions of a free investigation, we are led to most valuable and interesting conclusions. We find ourselves dealing not with the "book of God," but with the "book of Man." As book of God men stumbled against its shortcomings, its puerilities, its contradictions, its absurd commands, its harsh decrees. It hung as a millstone about the neck of piety even. Not daring to question the authority of the letter, the mind was paralyzed and distorted trying to reconcile it with reason or with right, until all natural human interest in it was dried up, while the prejudice of unbelief found its chief joy in buffeting the book, and used its fables and texts to glorify the choice of atheism or infidelity.

As the book of man it ceases to be a

perpetual challenge to reason or the stumbling block of faith. It takes its place as a part of the devout literature and religious history of the world. Who wrote its several parts we scarcely ever know. We know, perhaps, in what era, and in what race or land they had their origin. Sometimes rightly, more often wrongly, they are attributed to some names prominent in the history of the period. But generally the epoch had passed away before there was any thought of preserving its events. The need of writing was not felt while eye-witnesses lived. Each part rescued as by chance from the ravages of time, altogether the bible, is the principal part of a nation's literature. Old Testament or New Testament, it was written, as the learned Lightfoot said, "among Jews, by Jews, and for Jews."

The moment its miscellaneous character and the manner of its collection is seen, it is disqualified for the uses to which it has been chiefly put. It can no longer be accepted as the dogmatic and infallible word of God. Bind up together Phillips Brooks, Parker and Benjamin Franklin, Washington and Walt Whitman, the newspapers and the hymn books all in one volume, and with such diverse materials we should illustrate in modern American literature what was done in the ancient Jewish. Or take any town library. To declare that the Bible says this or proves that, is much as if one should say the town library establishes a truth or settles a doctrine. So miscellaneous and diverse is the make-up of the Bible—prose and poetry, fact and fancy, philosophy and history—the collective library of the Hebrew people.

All this is commonplace now to the scholar, but still more widely it must be told to the many, that they may come to the book of man seeking in the right spirit, not to go away disappointed. It records man's earliest thoughts of nature; his experience in the search after God; his longing also for justice and immortal life, and his progress toward a purer worship. Here are the hymns he sang, the truths he saw, the causes for which he was willing to die. What an interest these themes have for all serious readers! We behold its great antiquity—how far back its legends run into the mythical past. We behold the clash and mingling of rude and primitive races—what ambitions swayed them, what superstitions terrified them, what worships they rendered, what commands they obeyed. There is the lesson of failure and faithlessness; the lesson, also, of integrity and triumph. Sometimes, for a while, sin and wrong seem to prevail; but in the end, as all history teaches, no principle except purity and righteousness are crowned: "no good thing is failure, and no evil thing success."

There are miracles and extravagant stories contained therein, such as delight primitive men; which even entertain men in our time who have not outgrown their primitive or childish tastes. Not less than the Greeks did Jews and Christians have their mythology. "The miracles in the gospels are like the miracles in Plutarch's Lives; they do not lessen the value of the biography, and the value of the biography does not lessen the incredibility of the miracles." And yet, while we no longer believe these legends, we should no more think of treating these irrational stories with harshness or contempt than we should think of tearing in pieces the fairy-book which gives pleasure to your child or mine. They are part of this ancient record and collection, product of the human mind, and we spurn no book in this or any library simply because it falls short of perfection. Men are, however, justly made indignant, I think, when they are told that all these things are to be believed as the veritable word of God, as the absolute truth, and then used, perhaps, in the support of doctrines which no one in his right mind can accept—doctrines which demoralize human life and defame the divine character. As a God-made, infallible revelation, from first to last, of eternally-binding truth, it is a ceaseless provocation. We cannot believe that the creation took place in six days, when the records of nature testify that millions of years must have passed between the first and the later forms of life. No writings can justify the fickleness and Molochism of the Hebrew Jehovah, or the psalmist's bitter cursing. "We shall

not believe in ghosts, though Isaiah did; nor in devils, though Jesus teach there are such."

Give the bible its true place, not as master but as servant of the soul, and the mission of the man who can coin his thousands by publicly exhibiting its barbarisms and inconsistencies will end. Assaults and sneers will cease. All serious men will return to it to find its treasures of ethical wisdom and devout feeling. Held no longer in dogmatic chains, it will speak with human voice to the human heart. It will cease to be a household fetish, superstitiously worshiped, though no longer read. It will become a friendly companion, inspiring men with new power to do and bear, bringing to the life courage, sweetness and trust.

The bible is the annals of a unique race —its tragedy, its triumph, its dream, its conflict, its poetry, its penances, its sorrows, its aspirations. The genius of religion is in them, making them imperishable. The intense life and earnestness which pervade them singled them out at first for preservation, and through centuries of neglect or abuse have enabled them to withstand the obliterating shocks of time.

Among all the world's classics, for religious uses, this is our richest heritage from the past. And one of the most imperative offices of religion now is to give this new-found bible, the bible rescued from the monastery and the priest, the bible released from the chain of Protestant dogma, the bible of rational criticism, the natural bible—to give this Book of Man to the people. Nothing can so speedily break the illusions that bind them to bigotry and narrowness. Set the book free that men may be free. The true word of God, as it speaks in history or is uttered through nature, is not bound. It must be humanized to be understood. These scriptures wrote themselves. They could not help it. They were first in the hearts and thoughts of men. And when these men declared their convictions, or told their experiences, summed up the laws of life, or poured forth their emotions in song, the utterances of genius could not be forgotten. They were repeated from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation, until one day the scribe came and caught these sayings and traditions down and set them in order. So mainly the bible grew and was produced: while from period to period through that long past we see our fellowman working his perplexed and devious way from barbarism to civilization, from bad to better; with ceaseless prayer and unfaltering hope that he might rise still higher, even from better unto best.

"Out from the heart of nature rolled
The burdens of the Bible old;
The litanies of nations came,
Like the volcano's tongue of flame,
Up from the burning core below,—
The canticles of love and woe.
* * * * * * *
The word unto the prophet spoken
Was writ on tables yet unbroken;
The word by seers or sibyls told,
On groves of oak or fanes of gold,
Still floats upon the morning wind,
Still whispers to the willing mind.
One accent of the Holy Ghost
The heedless world hath never lost."

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Our "Church-Door Pulpit" hints its purpose in its name. It aims to furnish fortnightly a transfigured tract,—transfigured by being paid for, and by representing not so much a given system of beliefs as the emphasis, in somewhat varying beliefs, on "Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion;" this tract to be taken from the rack or table at the church-door to the home, there to serve its little mission by reading in the family, lending to a neighbor, mailing to a distant friend, etc. We hope the plan may be destined to wide adoption by Liberal churches as part of their regular church-work.

The word "UNITY" in the title bears to the Committee who arrange the series a wide meaning, pointing more to the substance, than to the forms, of religious thought and faith; and in inviting contributions they have sought, not only through the whole range, but in both directions beyond the range, of those who bear the "Unitarian" name,—though most of the writers must naturally be found within that name. "New Orthodoxy," "New Judaism," those who care for no name but "Religion," and the "Ethical Societies," will all be represented. The choice of subject is left to the writers; and *each writer is responsible for his own utterance alone, and for nothing else in the series.* "One of your best—a life-helping sermon, or a thought-sermon reaching the life," was the invitation sent out.

*** Published Semi-Monthly (except during July and August), by The Colegrove Book Co., 135, Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill. Ten copies or more to one address, each, 50 cts. a year. Single copy one year, $1.00. Entered at the Chicago Post-Office as second-class matter.

# UNITY CHURCH-DOOR PULPIT.

The second year of the "CHURCH DOOR PULPIT" began in April, 1885. Of the series of twenty sermons, four numbers will be devoted respectively to

double no. **Channing, Parker, Emerson, Martineau,**

giving a score or two of what in each writer may be called his "*Gospel passages.*" If one would learn in short space for what the four great prophets of our Liberal Faith stand, let him read these numbers; and keep them on hand to give a friend. If these four pamphlets do not furnish "Scripture readings" for the *pulpit* also, it will be a surprise.

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will be respectively treated in extracts from several writers. Each of these three pamphlets will be, as it were, a handful of short liberal tracts on its special subject.

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**Andrew P. Peabody,**
**Minot J. Savage,**
**John Snyder,**

The hope is that our churches, West and East, will catch the new church-habit, to *regularly and freely furnish forth a table or shelf near the door with such pamphlets*, first for home reading and then for lending and mailing, *each reader becoming his own missionary society for whatever he finds worthy.* It is found that a minute's "prelude" from the minister, describing the "Church-Door" sermon for the day and its preacher, interests the people in it and him, and usually causes the table to be swept of its thirty, forty or fifty copies. But much of the people's interest depends upon this prelude-habit. To make his dumb colleague do good work the minister must treat him heartily.

Of course some of the sermons will be more liked than others, and be better fitted for mission service. If now and then, among the twenty, one contradicts words spoken at the other end of the church, what then? The note on each pamphlet explains the matter; and, if necessary, the minister's "prelude" can explain it farther. But it should be remembered that these sermons, departing somewhat from our thought, are the very ones which best preach our Gospel of Religious Fellowship,—which show we *mean* it.

In this way nearly 30,000 "Church-Door Pulpit" sermons were distributed more or less widely last year, mainly in the West. It is probable that nothing like so many tracts could have been circulated here in any other way. And probably no better way can be devised of making each church, East and West, a little "Propaganda" society of our Faith and Principles. Everybody knows *one* person who would like to read what *he* likes. Anybody will hand or mail one tract. And this local and post-office Propaganda is much more likely to enlist members and interest the church at large, if the work is allowed to cost them a trifle, than if it costs them nothing. A tract *paid for* is almost redeemed! Paid for by one of its receivers and on-speeders instead of by some Society, it is "twice blessed,—it blesseth him that gives and him that takes."

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